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SUBJECT: CONSERVATIVE MUSLIM BODY LOSING CREDIBILITY

REF: 08 JAKARTA 0063

Classified By: Pol/C Joseph L. Novak, reasons 1.4(b+d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Indonesia's most important Islamic juridical body, the MUI, issued a series of controversial edicts (fatwas) during its recent national conference. The edicts included partial bans on yoga and smoking. The group also urged Muslims to vote for qualified Muslims in coming elections and not to abstain. Separately, members of the MUI have recently come under criticism for alleged corruption. Taken together, the controversial national convention and the corruption allegations have hurt the MUI's credibility, although it remains a very important religious institution in this Muslim majority nation. END SUMMARY.

ABOUT THE MUI

12. (U) The Indonesian Council of Ulema (MUI) is a semi-governmental body and the highest authority on Islamic affairs in Indonesia. It oversees the halal certification process (determining whether food is allowed or forbidden under Islam), sets regulation for Sharia banking and it also issues religious edicts (fatwas). These edicts are considered guidelines and not binding, but are often used by the Indonesian government to formulate policy.

A STRANGE NATIONAL CONFERENCE

13. (U) MUI commenced its two day national conference in West Sumatra on January 25 by issuing eleven new edicts, many of which were considered controversial. Over 700 clerics attended the national conference, which is designed to debate the broader topics impacting on Islam in Indonesia. The most controversial of the new edicts include:

-- A ban on yoga that contains Hindu religious rituals, including meditation and the recitation of mantras.

-- A ban on smoking in public, and for pregnant women and children.

-- A ban on voter abstention if qualified Muslim candidate on ballot.

-- A ban on vasectomies.

14. (C) Critics have slammed the MUI claiming the edicts are unenforceable, confusing and ridiculous. Muslim scholar and governmental advisor Azyumardi Azra said the edicts were unnecessary and "like most MUI edicts, would likely be ignored by the public." Speaker of the House Agung Laksono said the ban on non-voting if a qualified Muslim was on the ballot was "out of the domain" of the religious institution. The right to vote or abstain was guaranteed in the constitution, he said, and should not be linked to religion. Leaders of Indonesia's two largest mainstream Islamic organizations, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, also expressed concerns regarding the fatwas.

15. (U) Some of the edicts are welcomed by advocacy groups, particularly the MUI's stance on abortion. Although the MUI banned abortion, it made clear exceptions for victims of rape, women whose lives are threatened by pregnancy, or when the pregnancy is terminated in the first five weeks. (Note: Abortion is illegal in Indonesia, except when the mother's life is at risk, but there are no government regulations on procedures. Ministry of Health figures indicate 30-50% of maternal mortalities in Indonesia are caused by illegal and unsafe abortions. End note.) Women's groups would like to use the edict as a foundation for clearer laws and government oversight.

CORRUPTION ALLEGATIONS

16. (SBU) Separately, the MUI has taken a hit due to corruption allegations. In a recent survey, MUI ranked 15th on Transparency International Indonesia's list of most corrupt government institutions in Indonesia. According to the results, bribery takes place in approximately ten percent of MUI interactions with food and drug companies associated with the issuance of halal certificates. Although this has long been widely suspected, the TII survey and its public dissemination hurt the MUI's image. (Note: Mainstream Muslim leaders, including VP Kalla Advisor Azyumardi Azra told us of suspected corruption at MUI in earlier meetings. End note.)

LOSING SOME CREDIBILITY BUT STILL A FACTOR

17. (C) Among Indonesia's over two hundred million Muslims, MUI still commands considerable respect and therefore retains significant influence over government policy. Its guidance, for example, played a key role in the GOI's decision in 2008 to constrain the activities of the Ahmadiyah, an Islamic sect. The recent corruption allegations and the newest string of unclear edicts is causing it to lose credibility among many Muslims, who in practical terms view its directives as unnecessary and unenforceable. Over time, this may cause MUI's influence in society at large to diminish.

HUME